

Life and Death in the *Cena Trimalchionis*

Trimalchio's extreme obsession with death is evident throughout the *Cena* and is noticeably demonstrated during his banquet with his water clock and trumpeter telling him how much of his life he has lost, with the reading of his will, and even with the mock funeral that accompanies his dinner. Many scholars note the thematic thread of death interwoven throughout the *Cena*,¹ and some have pointed out how Trimalchio pairs life with death, claiming that he confounds the two.² Setting myself slightly apart from these scholars, I would argue that Trimalchio does mix the two, not out of ignorance, but rather intentionally as an essential aspect of his view on life. He links the two together so frequently that they often become one and the same. Trimalchio's credo is to live life to the fullest because life is short, so he repeatedly tells his guests to eat, drink, and be merry, for soon they will die. For Trimalchio, it is not **all** about dying, it is about living as well. When we take a closer look at the *Cena*, we see that the way in which Trimalchio composes his banquet is littered with references that blend together both death and life.

I hope to demonstrate his fusion of life and death by analyzing the two ecphrasis scenes which frame the dinner. These artistic scenes allow the guests of the banquet to encounter images of Trimalchio's life story and death. On closer analysis one finds that the subject matter that Trimalchio chooses to present are inversions of one another according to what one would typically expect on those different mediums. The images he depicts on his wall of his ascent to freedom are those which one would normally find on funerary monuments, while the description of his tomb monument display elements that reflect his activities in life.³ Trimalchio uses these two artistic representations of his life to connect life with death and death with life. For Trimalchio, the one does not exist without the other. This mentality of blending life and death which is framed in the depictions that surround the banquet also translates to the actions of Trimalchio at the dinner and impacts how we read the *Cena*. No longer is food what it appears: from a dead boar emerges living birds (40.5ff.); along with the Opimian wine (the "stuff of life"), we are soberly reminded of mortality with the presence of a silver skeleton (34.7ff.) – all of which culminate in the mock death that Trimalchio acts out during his dinner party. For Trimalchio, death is necessary as a part of life so that when he dies, the inverse will hold true – life is a part of death. In this way, Trimalchio will be able to continue to live on. The *Cena* is not strictly about death, but also Trimalchio's response to mortality by living. While he is alive, he will continue to play at death and when he finally dies, he finds a way to perpetually live. Trimalchio sees death as eminent, but while he lives he will eat, drink, be merry and even pretend to die, because for Trimalchio while he lives, he dies and when he dies he will still live on.

...postquam nos auferet Orcus. Ergo vivamus, dum licet esse bene.

¹ Arrowsmith (1966) sees the entire *Satyricon* as a representation of luxury and death. Bodel (1944) identifies the *Cena* as Encolpius' descent into the underworld, and Courtney (2001) 96 claims that it is one of the underlying themes of the *Cena*.

² See Slater (1990) 68 and Zeitlin (1971) 622.

³ Examples include a banqueting scene, images of his wife, Fortunata and his *deliciae*, and even how one interprets the image of a ship going with full sails.

Works Cited:

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Bodel, John. 1994. "Trimalchio's Underworld." In James Tatum, ed., *The Search for the Ancient Novel*. Baltimore. 237-259.

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